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Marxism and the National Question: Domenico Losurdo's Contribution to the Dialectics of the National and International

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ABSTRACT

In the works of Marx and Engels, the national question does not assume a central role, although their reflections on the independence of Ireland and Poland are very important. From the Second International onwards the debate increased its relevance, particularly through Rosa Luxembourg's remarks and Lenin's formulations of imperialism, self-determination, and national liberation struggles. However, it was during the challenges of national independence and construction in the socialist experiences that the national question became central. Domenico Losurdo, addressing the national-international dialectic, contributed to the theoretical maturation of the national question within Marxism, since his views enable a multiscale approach to class struggle in the context of transformations of capitalism and the international system. This article aims to analyze the controversial debate on the national question from the perspective of the formulations of Domenico Losurdo.

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1. Introduction

The debates over the national question are among the most complex and controversial topics for Marxist theory and for the International Communist Movement. To a certain extent, this is related to the fact that for Marxism the national question is intertwined with another fundamental concept, internationalism. Moreover, as happens with every political concept, they are extremely difficult to disentangle from the ideological perspectives of those operating them. Nationality, nationalism, nationalization and internationalism are words full of meanings and imprecisions. As Andrew Heywood (2011, 4–5) points out, political concepts often become the subject of intellectual and ideological controversy due to their intrinsic polysemy. As a result, the imbroglis of this debate within the social sciences are clearly expressed by state-centric or trans-nationalist, simplistic views, incapable of understanding the interaction between the State and the internationalization of capital in the contemporary international system.

Marx and Engels never elaborated a systematic and specific study on the national question, but numerous references to this topic have appeared throughout their works.

Marxists usually consider this to be one of the major gaps in the original theoretical elaborations of Marxism (Traverso and Löwy 1990). It was only at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning twentieth century that the national question became central, causing intense controversy among the Marxists of the Second Socialist International, such as Eduard Bernstein, Van Kol, Karl Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg, Otto Bauer, Lenin, and Stalin. The debate on the national question gained prominence together with those concerning the development of imperialism. In other words, the imperial policies of the world powers and their “civilizing mission” (the infamous white man’s burden) forged opposing demands for struggles of national liberation and for the right to self-determination.

As the Brazilian Marxist Paulo Visentini (2017a) emphasizes, the national question transcends the definition of what is usually understood by the concept of nation (ethnicity, language and culture), because it is related to the national state, in its different forms in time and space, and the correlation of forces of the international system. The national question is a complex topic because it refers to the analysis of national identity, nationalism, the formation of new independent nation-states and, above all, the role of these political arrangements in the struggle for sovereignty and development in an international framework marked by deep asymmetries. Furthermore, several nuances and contradictions surrounding this theme are due to the understanding that not all movements of self-determination have the same progressive content—sometimes they assume xenophobic forms and could serve the interests of the great powers.

In this context, the purpose of this article is to analyze the contribution of Domenico Losurdo on the national question, in light of the controversies developed within the Marxist tradition. It can be argued that the Marxist concept of the national question intertwines the domestic and international dimensions in a singular way, blending the theoretical and practical aspects, as well as the multiple ways in which class struggles arise. Hence this article is divided into three sections: the first section discusses the first formulations of the national question until the debates of the Second International; the second section analyzes the criticism elaborated by Lenin and the political challenges of the national question in the context of the formation of the USSR; and, finally, the contribution of Domenico Losurdo to the debate on the national question today.

2. The National Question: From Its First Formulations to the Second International

Originally, the debate on the national question was left aside by the communist movement. The first political party to draw inspiration from Marx’s work deliberately ignored this topic, regarding it as a problem of the bourgeoisie (Galissot 1984, 173). In 1848, Marx and Engels wrote in the Communist Manifesto: “The working men have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got” (Marx and Engels 2010, 502). In the same document, they also acknowledge that national struggles played an important role but supported the idea that workers should be galvanized to fight for the interests of the whole proletariat, independent of any nationality. The reason was clear. Although the bourgeoisie still retained different national interests, due the creation of the big industries, all nations had the same interests and were bound to perish.

As Michael Lowy points out, Marx never offered a precise definition of the concept of nation and much less a concrete strategy for the proletariat to act (Löwy 1976). This was not due to a careless oversight, but to the fact that the founders of Marxism lived in a historical context where these debates and conceptions that we nowadays assume as given were developing. Hobsbawm (1992, 30–40) made a comprehensive research on the origins of the concept and its derivations only to conclude that Marx was not the only one lacking a precise definition, several authors, including Adam Smith, operated with different meanings.

The nineteenth century witnessed the birth and development of the great debates that marked the twentieth century, some even continuing to the present day. Idealism and materialism, capitalism and socialism, among other examples, occupied the center of the intellectual debates of that time. The case of nationalism and internationalism was another topic of great controversy. Similar to all the aforementioned examples, the discussion on the national question evolved throughout the century, accumulating practical experiences and theoretical advances. Thus, the views of Marx and Engels on this subject also evolved and became more complex over time. As the ideas of nation and nationalism became more and more prominent in political discourse, they recognized the importance of the national struggles in Ireland and Poland. The Irish question is an emblematic example of a first formulation on the national question: the emancipation of Ireland was a path for the liberation of the English working class from the ideological controls of the bourgeoisie, a necessary step towards the revolution (Galissot 1984, 185).

The emergence of the Marxist debate on the national question was born from the contradiction of an ever-growing international system sidelining nation-states. While capital found no frontiers, workers were circumscribed to territories and subject of a process of language and culture standardization that produced among them increasing nationalistic appeals. This gave rise to the economic disputes between workers of different nationalities who came to see each other as possible rivals. As a result, the political parties linked to the working class began to be pressured by nationalistic demands and sought to produce theoretical and practical answers.

According to Hobsbawm (1992, 10), for the communist movement the nation would exist both to fulfill functions of a type of territorial state—or as an aspiration for its establishment, as well as in the context of a certain stage of technological and economic development. When the socialist movement began to address the national question, virtually every major Marxist theorist participated in the debate. Among them were Otto Bauer, Rosa Luxemburg, Kautsky, Lenin and Stalin, demonstrating the importance assumed by the subject at the end of the nineteenth century. The Second Socialist International (1889–1916) became the battleground where the main debates surrounding the national question took place, a space for the elaboration and action of the communist movement in that context (Hobsbawm 2002, 205).

In 1896, at the fourth congress of the Second International held in London, the universal right to self-determination of all nations and opposition to colonialism was approved. In two resolutions the question clearly appears: “the congress declares itself in favor of the autonomy of all nationalities . . .” and “the congress declares that whatever the pretext, religious or civilizing, of colonial politics, it is nothing more than the extension of the capitalist field of exploitation in the exclusive interest of the capitalist class” (Carone 1991). Opposing colonialism became gradually one of the main banners

of the working-class movement. At the Congress of 1900, colonialism was condemned unanimously, mainly because of the Boer War (1899–1902). In 1903, the program of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, under the pressure of the Bolsheviks, included the right to self-determination of peoples (Connor 1984, 10; Galissot 1984, 217). In sum, as Andreucci (1984, 261) has pointed out, “the European socialists who claimed Marxism were all—at least until the end of the nineteenth century—firm opponents of colonial policy.”

However, a major change occurred in 1907 at the Seventh Congress of the Second International, held in Stuttgart, Germany. At this Congress most members of the colonial commission thought that not all colonial policies should be rejected; some delegates argued that under a socialist regime certain colonial policies could have a civilizing effect. Thus, emerged a type of colonialism known as “positive” or “socialist,” supposedly humanized, under the leadership of Eduard Bernstein and Van Kol (Fiori 2014, 65). The German politician would justify his position regarding colonialism by recalling the revolutionary advances brought about by capitalism through its rapid development of the productive forces, a conception associated with Marx and Engels and general political economy widely accepted at that time (Andreucci 1984, 258). For this reason, according to Bernstein, civilized peoples should exercise a guardianship over backward peoples; and socialists should recognize this fact and escape the utopian idea of refusing colonies, as this would hinder the economic development of backward regions. In this sense, according to Kol’s conception, had the United States had not been colonized by the British, the backward culture of the Native Americans would hold back development (Kautsky 1975).

After fierce discussions, the concept of positive colonialism was rejected by the majority of the delegates of the congress by 127 votes to 108 (Bottomore 1988, 197). Kautsky was one of the most vocal opponents of positive colonialism. According to him (Kautsky 1975), colonial policy was based on the mistaken assumption that only the civilized peoples of Europe were capable of independent development. This policy, as well as militarism, was only a necessity of the capitalist class. Thus, it could not be included as a necessity of the proletariat. On the contrary, the socialist principle that all men are equal was a real force in the movement, not a mere slogan, according to Kautsky (1979, 96). Moreover, he understood that there would be a possibility of an alliance between the proletariat of the European countries and the national liberation movements of the colonies. Although their immediate goals were not the same, they fought against a common enemy, European capitalism.

Nevertheless, the principle of self-determination of peoples was far from being a consensus among the biggest Marxist minds of the Second International. Rosa Luxemburg had a rather negative view on the subject. According to her, the idea of a national state came with the ascent of the bourgeoisie, so it would not be fitting for the proletariat to engage itself in this debate (Galissot 1984, 234). As a result, her position against the right of self-determination of nations, especially Poland, was against the position of Marx and Engels who joined the movement for the independence of Poland.

At the London Socialist International Conference in 1897, Luxemburg opposed the motion for a resolution in support of Poland’s self-determination (Gouvêa 2012, 58). According to her, the demand for Poland’s political independence was supported by two arguments:

first, the general perniciousness of annexations from the point of view of the interests of the proletariat; and second, the special significance of the subjugation of Poland for the continued existence of the Russian tsardom, and thus, by implication, the significance of Polish independence for its downfall. (Luxemburg [1896] 1976)

Regarding the first point, she put forward the question: If the national liberation of Poland is elevated to a political goal of the international proletariat, why could the same not be said for the cases of Czechoslovakia, Ireland and Alsace-Lorraine? In 1909, in response to the ninth point of the program of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party approved in 1903, which granted “that all nationalities forming the state have the right to self-determination”. (Luxemburg [1909] 2006). Rosa Luxemburg ([1909] 2006) emphasized that the recognition of the right to self-determination would correspond to the approval of the bourgeois nationalism of the oppressed nations. Thus “the right of nations to self-determination” seems at first glance a paraphrase of the old slogan of bourgeois nationalism: “the right of nations to freedom and independence.” As for the second point, Luxembourg stated that the internal force of the Russian Empire did not come from the subjugation of Poland but from the backward social relations within Russia itself, allowing the nobility to extract the obedience and resources of the peasantry. In sum, in Luxembourg’s perspective, the “right of nations”—which embraces all countries and all times with equal justice—is nothing more than a cliché, a metaphysical phrase, like its analogues “rights of man” and “rights of the citizen.” Dialectical materialism—the foundation of scientific socialism—would definitively eliminate these “eternal” axioms from their vocabulary (Luxemburg [1909] 2006).

Moreover, Luxemburg ([1909] 2006) affirmed that attempting to resolve all national issues within the framework of capitalism by guaranteeing the “self-determination” of all nations, peoples and tribes would be a utopia. The solution for the question of nationalities, as for the other social and political problems within the framework of capitalism, would be a matter of class interests. And after the Russian Revolution, Luxembourg warned that Russia itself would be at risk of disintegrating because of the idea of the right to self-determination raised by the Bolsheviks. In short, the working-class movement had to deal with more complex scenarios than those formulated in the Manifesto in the mid-nineteenth century (Galissot 1984, 226). Nationalist and imperialist pressures gained new contours between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Consequently, the national question began to be expressed in new and different forms, such as the problem of nationalities, the formation of new national territories, the insertion of workers into national political movements, the warmongering-colonies of various nations, and so on.

3. From Lenin’s Critique to the Challenges of Praxis

It can be argued that Lenin’s contributions to the national question are among the most original and important for both Marxist theory and the revolutionary movement. The Russian leader’s interest in nationalism began in the early years of the twentieth century and became central to his political thought (Connor 1984, 30). Thus, as we will discuss below, the question of national struggles inserted by Lenin in the debate on imperialism meant a radical turn against those who recognized something positive in colonialism, and “profoundly modified proletarian internationalism and the very vision of the world revolution” (Galissot 1987, 231).

With the advent of the First World War the national question would gain new contours. Lenin assumed that national oppression was a potential contributing factor to the proletarian revolution, and thereby concluded that association of the class struggles in each nation with the anti-imperialist struggles for national liberation would be decisive for the seizure of power. In addition to breaking with the dominant ethnocentrism in the European working-class movement, Lenin contributed immensely to approximate and synchronize Marxism with the struggle of the peoples on the periphery of the world system, giving new breath to the working-class movement.

For this reason, most of the independence movements, especially after 1945, were identified with the communist and anti-imperialist tradition. As soon as the goal of independence was achieved, most of these countries declared themselves to be of socialist orientation (Hobsbawm 1992, 149). Furthermore, Marxism offered a complex theory for the conquest and maintenance of power, for national development and for state and nation building (whether unitary or multiethnic), in addition to having international support from the existing socialist bloc (Visentini 2017b, 104–105).

Lenin's famous work *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination*, published in 1914, was a direct response to the questions raised by Rosa Luxemburg, his main adversary on this subject. According to him, the definition of self-determination under a Marxist perspective cannot have any other meaning "than political self-determination, state independence, and the formation of a national state" (Lenin 1972, 400). He also recalled that capitalism's ultimate triumph over feudalism throughout the world was linked to national movements. The tendency of any national movement would be to create national states, and these would be the most adequate framework for the development of capitalism. Nevertheless, this would not mean disregarding class contradictions within each country. The point was that sovereign states would ensure the most favorable conditions for the development of capitalism, fostering the absolute rule of capital in bourgeois countries. In this matter, Lenin assumed a position similar to Kautsky, both considered that the nation-state would be the standard and the general rule of capitalism.

The bourgeoisie of the oppressed nations would seek the unconditional support of the proletariat for their longings in the name of the "practicality" of their demands. However, according to Lenin:

The working class supports the bourgeoisie only in order to secure national peace (which the bourgeoisie cannot bring about completely, and which can be achieved only with *complete* democracy), in order to secure equal rights and to create the best conditions for the class struggle. Therefore, it is *in opposition to the practicality* of the bourgeoisie that the proletarians advance their *principles* in the national question; they always give the bourgeoisie *only conditional* support. (Lenin 1972, 410, italics in the original)

The proletariat places the union of workers of all nations first, which means valuing any national claim from the angle of the class struggle. For the working-class movement, the priority would always be to strengthen its class against the bourgeoisie and to educate the masses in the spirit of democracy and socialism. Thus, according to Lenin, it would be the task of the communist movement to safeguard the unity of the proletariat around the idea of socialism and to repulse the bourgeois influences of nationalism:

Insofar as the bourgeoisie of the oppressed nation fights the oppressor, we are always, in every case, and more strongly than anyone else, in favor, for we are the staunchest and the most

consistent enemies of oppression. But insofar as the bourgeoisie of the oppressed nation stands for *its own* bourgeois nationalism, we stand against. We fight against the privileges and violence of the oppressor nation, and do not in any way condone strivings for privileges on the part of the oppressed nation. (Lenin 1972, 412, italics in the original)

This perspective was in line with Stalin's famous book, *Marxism and the National Question*, probably written under Lenin's guidance, which became the classical Bolshevik formulation of the problem of self-determination (Bottomore 1988, 276). The right to self-determination of peoples became an essential element in resolving the national question. While advocating national liberation struggles as an important instrument against imperialism, Stalin (1953, 319) drew attention to the fact that nationalism should not conceal class struggle, nor should the appeal to the nation serve as a propaganda tool for the advocacy of a harmonious relationship between opposing classes.

Indeed, Rosa Luxemburg, in her untiring struggle against nationalism in Poland, forgot Russian nationalism. This, as Lenin pointed out, was more terrible precisely because it was less bourgeois and more feudal, and because it would represent the main obstacle for proletarian and democratic struggles. Thereby, the bourgeois nationalism of an oppressed nation would have a general democratic content against oppression, and this is what the proletariat should support, but always in view of its class interests, avoiding the pitfalls of national exclusiveness (Lenin 1972, 413). Nevertheless, for the Bolshevik leader, supporting the right to self-determination in no way meant promoting separatism or any division of states according to the will of certain groups. Lenin argued that this would be as hypocritical as accusing partisans of divorce legalization of encouraging the disintegration of family (Lenin 1972, 422). In other words, the right to self-determination would not result in infinite separatism nor in the rejection of multinational states.

The interests of the proletariat and its struggle against capitalism would require the solidarity and close unity of workers from all nations, as well as the rejection of the nationalist policies of the bourgeoisie of any nation. However, the latter should be considered carefully because the denial of the right to self-determination would in practice result in the support for the privileges of the dominant nation (Lenin 1972, 424–425). Communists could not ignore the struggle for national liberation in a politically and economically hierarchized international system of states, with temporalities and different stages of struggle. As such, Lenin identified three sets of countries when examining the problem of self-determination:

First type: advanced countries of Western Europe (and America), where the national movement is a thing of the *past*. Second type: Eastern Europe, where it is a thing of the present. Third type: semi-colonies and colonies where it is largely a thing of the *future*. (Lenin 1964, 38, italics in the original)

Few nations could not dictate the rules of the world according to their own interests at the expense of the dignity of the various peoples of the world. Despite the refusal of the liberal bourgeoisie and the social-chauvinists, the oppressed peoples should have their political rights recognized.

In a report to the Commission on the National and Colonial Problems of the Third International (Comintern), Lenin (1974, 240–245), already the leader of the victorious revolution in Russia, divided his thesis into three points. First, the most important idea on the national question was the necessary distinction between oppressed nations and

oppressive nations. The distinctive feature of imperialism was that an insignificant number of nations, with enormous military strength, oppressed a large number of nations that make up the vast majority of the world's population. Secondly, the communist movement would need to consider that the imperialist countries would do everything to constrain the nascent Soviet state. Third, the Communists should support bourgeois democratic movements in backward countries.

Regarding the formation of the USSR, the challenges of praxis and the interlacing between the national and international are evident. That is to say, the national question was first presented to the Bolsheviks in complicated tasks regarding the construction of a new project of state and society. Overcoming feudal backwardness, under a hostile international siege and with a variety of 120 ethnic groups and languages, the challenges were immense. Furthermore, the Soviet (multi) national construction was oriented to the goal of propelling the communist movement globally, fomenting the creation of the Third International (Comintern) in 1919 and the consequent establishment of communist parties in many countries around the world. As a consequence of this process, the international principle for the Communists was to fight for national liberation, showing a need for some pragmatism, learning, and adaptation to the sinuosity of political struggles whilst respecting the historical and geographical circumstances of each nation. It is important to recall that in 1918 the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk relinquished territories where the majority of the population was Russian in favor of peace. In 1941, national fervor fueled the Patriotic War, the victory against Nazism and the annexation of the same territories (Pereira 2017). Ironically, the same Stalin who defended the idea of “socialism in one country”—not by design, but by appropriateness of the historical context, since it could not afford to dampen the enthusiasm of the Soviet people facing the immense difficulties of the post-war scenario—was the same that supported the significant expansion of the Soviet bloc and the spread of the revolution (Eastern Europe, Korea, China, etc.).

The territorial and administrative forging of the USSR itself had to address singular challenges. The solution was to preserve the territorial unit, guaranteeing the borders and the national powers of the new State, but under new political structures in a Federated Republic (Autonomous Republics, Autonomous Regions, Autonomous Regions and Administrative Units). Soviet socialism transcended the concept of a European nation by incorporating diverse identities into its state project, promoting national unity and the diversity of regional-local cultures (Pereira 2017). By consolidating the notions of territoriality and cultural expression, the Soviet period aroused and promoted various national or ethnic tendencies—although the formation of a Soviet people was on the horizon as the ultimate goal (Segrillo 2000, 159).

In addition, it is interesting to highlight that some of the most prominent Soviet leaders were not even Russian—including the two longest-serving Heads of State, Stalin and Brezhnev, as well as Khrushchev, born on the border but raised in Ukraine, as well as the unique collapse of the USSR—territorial secessions occurring without traumas and wars (Moraes 2007, 123–124), nor was it motivated by national rivalries, even though many nationalities, formerly colonized by Tsarism, became part of the multinational state during the Soviet period (Segrillo 2000). It is not a matter of underestimating the contradictions of politics, but of recognizing them in their historical context, in the face of Western racism, and in their geopolitical framework of revolution, military encirclement,

and wars. That is, between unrestricted autonomy and national oppression there is a universe of conditions and possibilities that determine actions and learnings.

4. The National-International Confluence and the Contribution of Domenico Losurdo

The national question has been a complex subject since it interweaves (i) with the theoretical maturation of Marxism, (ii) with the transformations of capitalism and the international system, and (iii) with the multifaceted and multi-scale character of class struggles. In this sense, the Italian author Domenico Losurdo offers important contributions to the debate by orienting his work around the complicated national-international relationship. According to him, the interaction between the national question and internationalism permeates the emancipatory process. The Italian author reminds us that the internationalist slogan “Proletarians of all countries, unite” of the Communist Manifesto is complemented by the Inaugural Message of the International Workingmen’s Association that explicitly calls the workers of England and the most advanced industrial countries to support the “national liberation” struggles in which nations such as Ireland and Poland are protagonists. Lenin made the same consideration but expanded the scope of the national liberation struggles to the weakest links of the capitalist system, he resumed this in his famous slogan “Workers and Oppressed Peoples and Nations of the World, Unite!” Mao Zedong also explained that “patriotism is an application of internationalism” (Losurdo 2015a, 153–185).

Instead of a contradiction, this is an understanding that evidences the absence of a clear distinction between the national question and the workers’ question, between the national struggle and class struggle. For Losurdo, class struggles can take various forms, not restricted to directly antagonistic subjects, it is a general theory of social conflict. One must avoid falling into the pitfall of understanding social conflicts under a binary perspective, as they are always multidimensional; they merge demands for redistribution (through overcoming of the social division of labor) and recognition (through overcoming of the dehumanization processes); they take on different priorities in each concrete situation in space and time; they configure different hierarchies, contradictions and conflicts of freedoms; they combine social, gender-family, ethnic-racial and state-nation issues; they intertwine class struggles among class factions with different levels of consciousness and mobilization (Losurdo 2015a, 168). It is not an exaggeration to say that the national question is complex precisely because it is crossed by multifaceted and multiscale social conflicts.

According to Losurdo, Marx and Engels, in their early years, cultivated the illusion that the proletariat, after developing a revolutionary consciousness, would carry out a revolution destined to emancipate, not only itself, but the whole of humanity. As Lenin correctly understood, the birth of imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century imposed a more rational analysis of the totality of national and international political and social relations and its correlations with class struggle. The cooptation of sectors of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie in England and other developed countries demonstrated that the process of attaining class consciousness was increasingly difficult.¹¹ Following in the footsteps of Lenin, Losurdo (2015a, 163) states that “the acquisition of class consciousness and the participation of the revolutionary class struggle presupposes the understanding of the social

totality and its entire aspect.” This is because the social-political order to be overthrown is not limited to the exploitation of the proletariat within the factory. Thus, the consciousness of the revolutionary class must account for “all the coercive relations that constitute the imperialist and capitalist system” (Losurdo 2015a, 166).

For the Italian Marxist, the failure of the Third/Communist International (Comintern) can be credited to the elaboration of a binary reading of social conflict on a world scale. Founded in 1919, the statutes approved at its Second Congress assumed that “the emancipation of workers is not a local or national problem, but an international one.” This gave birth to the conception that the Communist International would be the unitary representative of the communist movement throughout the world with the parties of each country being nothing more than its sections (Losurdo 2015a, 192). At the Comintern there was the dominance of the idea that the socialist revolution is the consequence of a single contradiction on a world scale, of the bourgeoisie and proletariat; and hence the need for a “world Bolshevik party.” The overcoming of this conception results in the inescapable dissolution of the Comintern determined by Stalin in 1943. Evidently, the historical trajectory reveals a more complex *praxis*. Stalin, whose previous experience included his leadership of the Commissariat of Nationalities, had to deal with particularisms and the imperatives of national unity. In addition, he also had to deal with the collaboration of some nationalities with Nazism during World War II, such as Volga Germans, Chechens, Crimean Tatars, Ingush, among others (Segrillo 2000, 164).

Without considering the challenges of *praxis*, it is not possible to understand that, instead of leading to the State’s self-dissolution, the Soviet experience strengthened its political-coercive apparatus in order to deal with the unanticipated imperative of accelerated development and modern warfare, with an expressive degree of specialization (Morales 2007, 123). Moreover, it is not possible to understand the autonomy of the state without understanding the impositions of backwardness (military siege, disjointed peasant population, underdevelopment) and the contradictions of existing socialist experiences (the duality of abundance-scarcity and the coexistence in the international capitalist system) (Fernandes 2000).

The national question reappears in the analysis of the problems that occurred in the USSR after Khrushchev’s accession to power in 1953. The policy of national unity carried out by the communists during the struggle against Nazism was terminated with Stalin’s demonization in the Secret Speech. Khrushchev not only attacked his predecessor but also dismantled the founding social pact of the revolution and the Patriotic War that had defeated the Nazis. This resulted in negative impacts in the development of the Soviet experience. As Losurdo (2004, 135) points out, the revolution advances precisely when it identifies itself with the social aspirations and the causes of the nation.

In fact, revolutionary processes transcend a tenuous threshold between a radical rupture with the past and the rescue of cultural heritages. It is within this framework that there is the nationalization of the revolution and its imperatives for national (re)construction on a new social basis. Hence, there are tensions between the interpretations drawn from the Soviet model (sometimes uncritical but understandable, since it was the only successful experience at that historical moment) and the challenges of acclimatization of Marxism to the historical-geographical realities of each country. Amid the contradictions of emancipatory and non-emancipatory processes, the *praxis* of a theory of universal scope in relation to its ultimate goal must respond to local and national challenges; it must

assimilate modernization and promote native cultures; it needs to learn contemporary forms of institutional arrangements and adapt them to the particularities of each experience.

In this sense, Marxist *praxis* is born in a historical context of a precarious stock of knowledge about extra-European regions. Later, with Lenin, it gained more amplitude by assimilating the challenges of self-determination in the imperialist phase. Not without contradictions, it sought to respond the specificities of the peripheral formations, with elaborations critical of ethnocentrism and neocolonialism, as evidenced by the elaborations of Latin Americans such as Che Guevara, Mariátegui and Juan de Almeida Bosque; Africans like Cabral, Machel, Sankara and Nkrumah; and Asians like Ho Chi Minh and Mao Zedong. As an example, in China itself, the first mention of the sinicization of Marxism occurred at the 7th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1945 (Junru 2011, 41), but efforts in this direction continued with setbacks and advances, as in the example of condemnation and later revival of Confucianism.

The national question is complex because in some circumstances the class struggle (social question) is intertwined with the national struggle (national question); in others the national struggle takes on a xenophobic form or lends itself to imperialist interests (Losurdo 2015a, 153–154).

According to Losurdo (2010), even apparently fair and progressive movements can carry within them reactionary and xenophobic ideas. The anti-Napoleonic struggle movement in Germany was also a reaction against the Revolution of 1789 and its Enlightenment ideals. The same could be said of the chauvinism within certain movements against the European Union that treat immigrants as responsible for unemployment among white workers. Thus, Losurdo (2015a) warns that national claims, even if just, may lose legitimacy if they are absorbed by interests that are harmful for the freedom and emancipation of nations.

Thus, nationalism can be employed in the affirmation of national identities, anti-imperialist struggles, and promote national development; or advocate expansionism, war, and racial supremacy. Internationalism can also be employed to defend the global moral and legal bases of capitalism; or fight for a society that surpasses the logic of capital. In sum, nationalism and internationalism are expressions that harbor grammatical improprieties, false antagonisms and unconvincing hierarchies.

There is no international order without national states; the very diffusion of goods, information and services on a global scale do not remove but give growing meaning to nations. That is, nations are not the fruit of exclusiveness, despite the warrior defense of physical space and affective (sacred) attachment to a territory, but rather a beloved daughter of internationality, of the intense circulation of goods, services and ideas (Domingo and Martins 2006, 80–84). In other words, the (national) territorial state has become more—not less—important for the organization of the economic circuits of internationalization. It is now the guarantor of the necessary conditions for social accumulation and coercion through property relations and the stability of contracts. And it is up to imperialism to solve the problem of “failed” states, to keep the others subordinated and to avoid any challengers, through political and military control of the *global system of multiple states*, structured in a complex relationship of subordination (Wood 2005).

One of the dialectical pairs that cross the national question is the tense and contradictory relationship between, on one side territorial integrity and sovereignty, and the other

side, the self-determination of peoples and the struggle for national liberation. It can be argued that virtually no country is homogeneous in ethnic-cultural terms, but diversity cannot be the pretext for undefined separatism. Territories where homogeneity is the strongest aspiration usually dialog more with xenophobia and racism than with self-determination. In fact, as Domingo and Martins (2006, 100) highlights, many dictionaries record Xenophobic and Separatism as synonyms to nationalism. How to equate the *dialectic between integrity and self-determination*?

Looking from a historical perspective, Losurdo (2015a, 170) recalls the case of the independence of Panama in 1903, engineered by the United States for the specific purpose of building the canal that should link the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. Lenin himself already pointed out that the movements of small nationalities can be manipulated by imperialism according to its interests. This is what happened in the 1990s with the disintegration of Yugoslavia, and now in the cases of separatist movements in Tibet (China) or Chechnya (Russia) and the independence movement of Baluchistan (Iran), whose convergence with the interests of the United States and its allies is evident. These national claims, when assimilated by imperialist interests, constitute a serious threat to the emancipation of nations (Losurdo 2015a, 171). In other words, the *real national oppression* of some minorities becomes an opportunity for powers to exploit other *international contradictions*.

Having a bond with place of origin is not enough to claim separatism and self-determination. First, because there is no legitimate cut off point to tracing territorial origins, nations are the fruit of a long evolution intersected by migrations and miscegenation. Secondly a multitude of territorial cuts can be made depending on the cultural, geographical and historical origin. As Domingo and Martins (2006, 100) reminds, “historical origin” and “tradition” are established according to the needs of the present and the future goals, that is, tradition is cultivated (sanctified) or despised according to the current socio-political interests, being those of preservation or disruption of the social order. That is, *there are times when a nation seeks a State and there are times when the State aims to construct national identities*.

One must also consider that the assumption of an ethnocentric universalism only reinforces colonial and racialized state institutions, especially in peripheral countries. In this case, often, the state multinational undermines ethnic minorities of the state, allowing the social and political recognition of other groups, in the complex process of affirming the state and the nation in a peripheral condition of the system. In many experiments, multinational institutions (India, Malaysia, Nigeria, South Africa, Bolivia) democratize power without retrograde ethnic-political claims that provoke destabilization (Linerá 2010).

The intertwining of the national question and internationalism translates into the impetus to support national liberation struggles while simultaneously not exporting the revolution and not imposing solutions to the problems of other nations. Losurdo (2015a, 166) illustrates this idea with the example of the Red Army’s August 1920 advance on Warsaw during the opening of the Second Congress of the Communist International. The advance on Warsaw was defended by most of the Bolsheviks, including Lenin who hoped that the Red Army would become a catalyst for the Polish working class to act. However, this posture disagreed with his own lessons about the enduring influence of the national question (Losurdo 2015a, 170). Indeed, given the incongruity of this action, Lenin himself came to regret his support for the invasion of Poland (Deutscher 2005, 489).

The history of the socialist camp is fraught with examples of this kind: the rupture of the Soviet Union with Yugoslavia (1948), the invasion of Hungary (1956), the invasion of Czechoslovakia (1968), the border conflicts between China and the Soviet Union (1969) and Vietnam (1979), the imposition of martial law in Poland (1981), among other cases (Losurdo 2015a, 179).

The national question also dialogs with the thematic of the State and its institutions. As Losurdo points out, the illusion of the disappearance of the state (and even of its power) hindered the democratic process in socialist experiences, particularly with regards to the role of rule-based decisions and the need to limit power. Moreover, the disappearance of the state becomes naive within the inter-state system, given the prerogative of order and security. That is, once again national challenges cannot be addressed without considering the complexity and asymmetries of the international order (Losurdo 2015a, 54–55).

At the present moment, the national question often involves the defense of sovereignty and multilateral institutions. It is the means of opposing the interventionist military adventures of the United States and its allies, that usually campaigns under the banners of “humanitarian intervention” and “responsibility to protect”; of the resurgence of the regime change policy (constitutional coups, Color Revolutions, Arab Spring); of open interventions through the Global War on Terrorism or even in aggressions through drones and kill lists; of embargoes and sanctions often outside international organizations; of other forms of intervention aiming at direct and indirect destabilization (Losurdo 2016, 125–126, 153, 188–191; Moniz 2014). In other words, “with the arrogation of the right to declare the sovereignty of other states superseded, the great Western powers ascribe to themselves an extended sovereignty” (Losurdo 2015b, 281).

Our times, as Losurdo points out, are marked by an international order marked by crises, a society of spectacle and wars. The neoliberal attack on the Welfare State not only intensifies inequalities in the economic sphere, but adds to the fragility of democracy, its institutions and social entities in the political sphere, and neocolonialism and interventionism, at the international level. This neocolonialism is updated by the glorification of war, by the intensification of psychological warfare (*Psywar*), by the revolution in military affairs (RMA), by the mobilization of communications for destabilization (Internet, social networks, etc.). In fact, coup d'états have become more sophisticated, not limited to military barracks, assuming new characteristics such as criminalization and destabilization, promotion of grassroots support from outside, as well as scenarios aimed at creating outrage and terror to make calls for “humanitarian assistance.” That is, these are events in which the West mobilizes its unprecedented soft power—deciding unilaterally when elections are regular and violence is legitimate—to establish “democratic protectorates” (Losurdo 2016).

We have witnessed the annihilation of what remained of the rule of law in international relations. Thus, international asymmetries and inequalities, a kind of breeding ground of war, are intensifying. In other words, universalism seeks to legitimize the export of values by the indispensable (chosen) nation, becoming an exalted ethnocentric exceptionalism capable of mobilizing in its right to war (*jus ad bellum*) all the resources of imperial and neocolonial power. To this end, concepts are unilaterally mobilized and distorted, as part of the imperial rhetoric. These are the cases of “terrorism,” “fundamentalism,” “anti-Americanism,” “Islamic extremism,” “hatred against the West” and “anti-Semitism,” whose Manichean presentation allows framing interventions in favor of the “civilized,”

“democratic,” “Judeo-Christians,” among other concepts. Thus, the end of the Cold War did not represent a new democratic era, but a third phase in the struggle between colonialism and anticolonialism (Losurdo 2016, 218, 249; Losurdo 2010), posing new challenges to the struggles for independence and national development (Losurdo 2010; Losurdo 2016, 218, 249). Noteworthy, for Losurdo, the first phase goes from the October Revolution to Stalingrad and the second phase from the cold war to the national liberation struggles in the developing world (Losurdo 2016, 249–250). This third phase is an ongoing process. The People’s Republic of China (PRC), which survived from the regime change strategy implemented by the West, still struggles to cope with the challenges imposed by the Western powers to its development and progress. Losurdo understands that due to China’s successful case, there is an ongoing plot that seeks to undermine the self-esteem of the CCP and the citizens of PRC in order to liquidate the example they consider an anomaly. There is an intense combination of economic and political-ideological pressure (Losurdo 2016, 337) that marks the dynamics of those turmoils in and around China and other countries who dare to challenge the West.

In two of his last works, *Western Marxism* and *A World without Wars*, the national question returns to guide the ideas of the Italian author. In the first work, the criticism of Western Marxism accuses them of underestimating the importance of anti-imperialism and anticolonial struggles, national development and sovereignty, for peripheral countries that are objects of revolutionary experiences. That is, while Western Marxists denounced power, they also pursued an alleged “authentic” Marxism, which ended up being filled with utopian dreams of messianic, post-capitalist societies. In the East by contrast, concrete revolutionary experiences were concerned with power, independence, and development out of adverse national and global scenarios (Losurdo 2018a, 186).

In the other work, by historically and theoretically problematizing the construction of a world without wars, Losurdo reaffirms the imperative of the peoples’ rights to self-determination, just as, on the other hand, it exposes the contradictions of imperial narratives. That is to say, it has been recurrent to use the condition of power to impose interests through the use of force, with the rhetoric of “international policemen,” “universal democracy,” “humanitarian interventions” or “national defense.” And so, he synthesizes the argument:

The pretension of a country or group of countries to be privileged or exclusive interpreters of universal values that they would be authorized to protect even with the unilateral and sovereign use of arms serves only to sanction the law of the strongest in the international field, perpetuating war and making it even more difficult to achieve peace. (Losurdo 2018b, 384)

Some challenges of the international system have bolstered capital’s power over labor. Through the precariousness of work and outsourcing, they create mismatches between occupations without identifiable historical subjects and traditional forms of representation, forging social movements marked by nihilism, dispersion and fragmentation. The green wave, social entrepreneurship and identity pluralism were projected after the struggles of May 1968, amalgamating with postmodern individualism and consumerism (Pochmann and Moraes 2017).

Indeed, the national question, rather than becoming an outdated debate, becomes more complex and more contemporary given the speed of the transformations and the challenges of any liberation struggle. The articulation between the national question and the

multifaceted and multiscale character of class struggles makes praxis even more challenging. The best way to deal with “real socialism” is not to flee from history (Losurdo 2004), but to understand these experiences as an important and long first learning (Amin 2010, 35), whose actualizations are essential. In other words, it is undeniable that the current world system—marked by a framework of international rearrangement—is fraught with contradictions and potential changes due to the unprecedented polarization of wealth (Piketty 2014), the globalization of labor versus proletarianization and the enormous technological potential of the 4th industrial revolution.

5. Concluding Remarks

The debate on the national question is crucial because it is the issue. If it is left unanswered the autonomy of a country (sovereignty) and national development cannot be achieved; the capacity to formulate public policies and to contemplate diverse social and identity demands are unattainable; the mechanisms of operation of the state apparatus and its institutions cannot be democratized. Hence, as Losurdo points out, it is important that the national question should be understood in terms of a general theory of social conflict, insofar as the forms of oppression and exploitation appear intertwined, overlapping, hierarchized, and *structured by class conflict*.

Otherwise, these agendas and demands are captured by liberal and postmodern approaches, producing effects contrary to the desired—and often involuntary—on the left-wing itself. In other words, either the national question articulates unity among diversity, or micro identities and corporatism will end up emptying any collective construction, dispersing forces by fragmenting the social struggle. Hence, the importance of nationalizing Marxism. This process, however should never remove solidarity between peoples and it must acclimatize and integrate itself with the cultural and historical boundaries of its territorial and national scope.

In conclusion, the interweaving of the national-international question is part of the complex theory of social conflict (and the dynamics of class struggle). In the era of full “globalization” and liberal hagiography, the sinuosity of the national question reaffirms the imperative of national struggles for development and sovereignty (Losurdo 2006). Without neglecting class struggles and while imperialism still exists, the amalgam of emancipatory processes will be the national question. If this is ignored, one assumes the risk of submitting to a certain abstract cosmopolitanism of no great political consequence. In synthesis, all the work of Losurdo addresses, directly and indirectly, the national question to approach anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, interventionism, processes of development, etc. In this sense, Domenico Losurdo recovers and develops the best Marxist tradition, one focused on debating national issues in contemporary reality.

Note

1. In his more mature writings Marx was aware that the consciousness of the working class was a much more complex matter.

In all the industrial and commercial centers of England, there is now a working class divided into two hostile camps, English proletarians and Irish proletarians. The English common laborer hates the Irish worker as a competitor that lowers the standard of

living. (...) It behaves more or less like the poor whites in relation to the blacks in the former states of the American Union. The Irishman reacts in the same currency. He sees in the English laborer the co-responsible of the idiot instrument of English domination over Ireland. (Galissot 1984, 186)

In the foreword to the Situation of the Working Class of England in 1892, Engels refers to an English worker aristocracy who had a good relationship with their employers and accepted their relatively comfortable position as something definitive (Engels 2010, 345–359).

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